



4woman.gov

800-994-WOMAN (9662)

888-220-5446 (TDD)

The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Obesity and Weight Loss

How many people in the United States are overweight or obese?

Among U.S. women 20 years and older, over 64 million are overweight and over 34 million are obese.

How do I know if I'm overweight or obese?

Obesity is measured with a body mass index (BMI), a measure of body fat based on height and weight. Individuals with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight, while individuals with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese.

You can find out your BMI using the calculator at www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi, or the chart on the following page.

What causes someone to become overweight or obese?

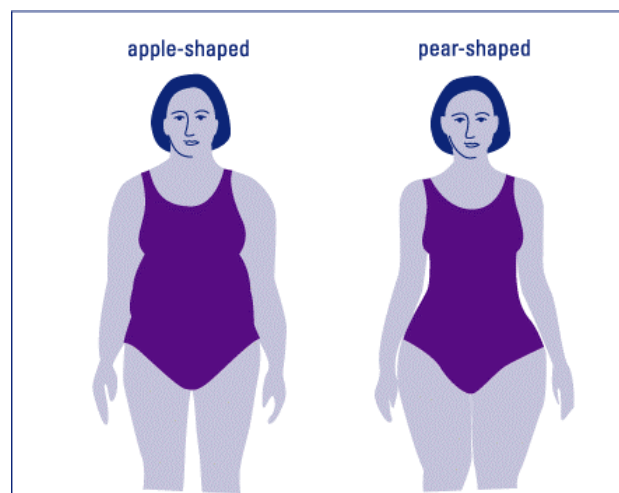
An unhealthy diet and physical inactivity are contributing factors to becoming overweight or obese. Overweight and obesity are problems that continue to get worse in the United States. Bigger portion sizes, little time to exercise or cook healthy meals, and relying on cars to get around are just a few reasons for this increase.

What are the health effects of being overweight or obese?

An unhealthy diet and physical inactivity can increase your chances of getting heart disease, cancer, stroke, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, breathing problems, arthritis, gallbladder disease, and osteoarthritis.

But body weight isn't the only problem. The places where you store your body fat also affect your health. Women with a "pear" shape tend to store fat in their hips and buttocks. Women with an "apple" shape store fat around their waists.

For most women, carrying extra weight around their waists (larger than 35 inches) raises health risks like heart disease, diabetes, or cancer more than carrying extra weight around the hips or thighs. Obesity can also affect medical care. Too much fat can obscure imaging tests, like X-rays, CT scans, ultrasound, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). For example, in an ultrasound, the beam may not be able get through layers of fat to get an image of a person's appendix, gallbladder, or kidneys. Too much body fat can make it harder for a doctor to make a medical diagnosis and treat a patient.



Body Mass Index Table

Normal						Overweight					Obese										Extreme Obesity															
BMI	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54
Height (inches)	Body Weight (pounds)																																			
58	91	96	100	105	110	115	119	124	129	134	138	143	148	153	158	162	167	172	177	181	186	191	196	201	205	210	215	220	224	229	234	239	244	248	253	258
59	94	99	104	109	114	119	124	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	173	178	183	188	193	198	203	208	212	217	222	227	232	237	242	247	252	257	262	267
60	97	102	107	112	118	123	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	174	179	184	189	194	199	204	209	215	220	225	230	235	240	245	250	255	261	266	271	276
61	100	106	111	116	122	127	132	137	143	148	153	158	164	169	174	180	185	190	195	201	206	211	217	222	227	232	238	243	248	254	259	264	269	275	280	285
62	104	109	115	120	126	131	136	142	147	153	158	164	169	175	180	186	191	196	202	207	213	218	224	229	235	240	246	251	256	262	267	273	278	284	289	295
63	107	113	118	124	130	135	141	146	152	158	163	169	175	180	186	191	197	203	208	214	220	225	231	237	242	248	254	259	265	270	278	282	287	293	299	304
64	110	116	122	128	134	140	145	151	157	163	169	174	180	186	192	197	204	209	215	221	227	232	238	244	250	256	262	267	273	279	285	291	296	302	308	314
65	114	120	126	132	138	144	150	156	162	168	174	180	186	192	198	204	210	216	222	228	234	240	246	252	258	264	270	276	282	288	294	300	306	312	318	324
66	118	124	130	136	142	148	155	161	167	173	179	186	192	198	204	210	216	223	229	235	241	247	253	260	266	272	278	284	291	297	303	309	315	322	328	334
67	121	127	134	140	146	153	159	166	172	178	185	191	198	204	211	217	223	230	236	242	249	255	261	268	274	280	287	293	299	306	312	319	325	331	338	344
68	125	131	138	144	151	158	164	171	177	184	190	197	203	210	216	223	230	236	243	249	256	262	269	276	282	289	295	302	308	315	322	328	335	341	348	354
69	128	135	142	149	155	162	169	176	182	189	196	203	209	216	223	230	236	243	250	257	263	270	277	284	291	297	304	311	318	324	331	338	345	351	358	365
70	132	139	146	153	160	167	174	181	188	195	202	209	216	222	229	236	243	250	257	264	271	278	285	292	299	306	313	320	327	334	341	348	355	362	369	376
71	136	143	150	157	165	172	179	186	193	200	208	215	222	229	236	243	250	257	265	272	279	286	293	301	308	315	322	329	338	343	351	358	365	372	379	386
72	140	147	154	162	169	177	184	191	199	206	213	221	228	235	242	250	258	265	272	279	287	294	302	309	316	324	331	338	346	353	361	368	375	383	390	397
73	144	151	159	166	174	182	189	197	204	212	219	227	235	242	250	257	265	272	280	288	295	302	310	318	325	333	340	348	355	363	371	378	386	393	401	408
74	148	155	163	171	179	186	194	202	210	218	225	233	241	249	256	264	272	280	287	295	303	311	319	326	334	342	350	358	365	373	381	389	396	404	412	420
75	152	160	168	176	184	192	200	208	216	224	232	240	248	256	264	272	279	287	295	303	311	319	327	335	343	351	359	367	375	383	391	399	407	415	423	431
76	156	164	172	180	189	197	205	213	221	230	238	246	254	263	271	279	287	295	304	312	320	328	336	344	353	361	369	377	385	394	402	410	418	426	435	443

Source: Adapted from *Clinical Guidelines on the Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults: The Evidence Report*.

How do I find out what the best way is for me to lose weight?

Experts agree that the best way to lose weight is to follow a sensible eating plan and engage in regular physical activity. If you're interested in a weight-loss program, it should encourage healthy behaviors that help you lose weight that you can maintain over time. Before you start a weight-loss program, talk to your doctor.

Safe and effective weight-loss programs should include these components:

- Healthy eating plans that reduce calories but do not rule out specific foods or food groups
- Regular physical activity and/or exercise instruction
- Tips on healthy behavior changes that also consider your cultural needs
- Slow and steady weight loss of about $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 pounds per week and not more than 3 pounds per week (weight loss may be faster at the start of a program)
- Medical care if you are planning to lose weight by following a special formula diet, such as a very-low-calorie diet
- A plan to keep the weight off after you have lost it

What steps can I take to have a healthier diet?

Follow these tips for healthy eating.

- **Start your day with breakfast.** Breakfast fills your “empty tank” to get you going after a long night without food. Make an easy breakfast like whole-grain cereal with fruit and fat-free or low-fat milk, whole-wheat toast with peanut butter, fat-free or low-fat yogurt with fruit, or whole-grain waffles. Eating breakfast will give you better strength, endurance, and concentration throughout your day.
- **Eat a variety of foods.** You don't have to give up foods that you enjoy like hamburgers, French fries, and ice cream to eat healthy. You just have to be smart about how often and how much of them you eat. Your body needs nutrients like protein, carbohydrates, fat, and many different vitamins and minerals from different foods. Balance your food choices to get important nutrients.
- **Eat a variety of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.** These foods give you energy, plus vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Besides, they taste good! Try foods like brown rice or whole-wheat bread. Bananas, strawberries, and melons are some great tasting fruits. Try vegetables raw, on a sandwich, or in a salad. Be sure to pick a variety of colors and kinds of fruits and vegetables. You can vary the form—try fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.
- **Watch your portion control.** Eating the right amount of food at each meal is just as important as eating the right foods. A serving is a specific amount of food, and it probably is smaller than you realize. Here are some examples.
 - A serving of meat (boneless, cooked), fish, or poultry is two to three ounces, or roughly the size of the palm of your hand, a deck of cards, or an audiocassette tape.

- A serving of fresh fruit is one medium piece, or the size of a baseball.
- A serving of cooked pasta, rice, or cereal is 1/2 cup, or half a baseball or a rounded handful.
- A serving of nuts is 1/3 cup, or a level handful.
- A serving of peanut butter is two tablespoons, about the size of a golf ball.
- A portion is the amount of food a person eats. Portions and servings are different. For example, one cheese sandwich is a portion, probably made up of two servings of bread and one serving of cheese.

How can physical activity help?

An active lifestyle can help every woman. You don't have to be as fit as a professional athlete to benefit from physical activity. In fact, 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week can greatly improve your health and have these benefits:

- reduces your risk of dying from heart disease or stroke
- lowers your risk of getting heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes
- lowers high blood pressure
- helps keep your bones, muscles, and joints healthy
- reduces anxiety and depression and improves your mood
- helps you handle stress and helps control your weight
- protects against falling and bone fractures in older adults
- may help protect against breast cancer
- helps control joint swelling and pain from arthritis
- helps you feel more energetic and helps you sleep better

Increase your physical activity by taking small steps to change what you do everyday!

If you normally...	Then try this instead!
park as close as possible to the store	park farther away
let the dog out back	take the dog for a walk
take the elevator	take the stairs
have lunch delivered	walk to pick up lunch
relax while the kids play	get involved in their activity

What USDA-approved drugs are available for long-term treatment of obesity?

Sibutramine. Also called Meridia, it is used together with a reduced-calorie diet to help you lose weight and keep the lost weight from returning. This medicine is approved for people whose initial body mass index (BMI) is at least 30. Patients with other risk factors, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, can be treated with the drug if their BMI is 27 or higher. It can cause an increase in pulse and blood pressure. While you are taking sibutramine, your doctor will check your blood pressure and heart rate at regular visits. People with uncontrolled high blood pressure should not take sibutramine. Other side effects include dry mouth, headache, constipation, insomnia, anxiety, irritability or unusual impatience, nervousness, stuffy or runny nose, or trouble in sleeping.

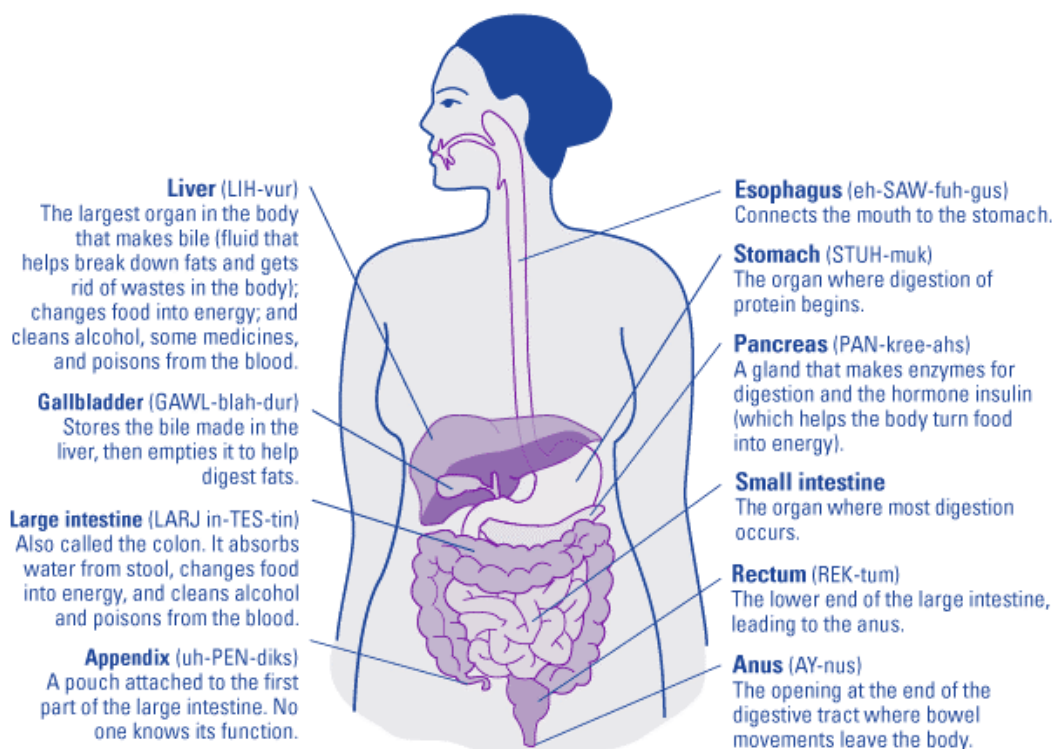
Orlistat. Also called Xenical, it prevents the body from absorbing some of the fat in food. It also prevents the body from absorbing some vitamins and beta carotene. Patients should take a vitamin supplement that contains fat soluble (A, D, E, and K) vitamins and beta carotene. The most common side effects of orlistat are gas with discharge, fecal urgency, fatty/oily stools, and frequent bowel movements.

What surgical options are available for weight loss?

Vertical banded gastroplasty (VBG).

Surgical staples are used to divide the stomach into two parts. The upper part is small, which limits space for food. Food empties from the upper pouch into the lower pouch through a small opening. A band is put around this opening so it doesn't stretch. Risks of VBG include wearing away of the band and breakdown of the staple line. In a small number of cases, stomach juices may leak into the abdomen or infection or death from complications may occur.

Your Digestive System



Laparoscopic gastric banding (Lap-Band). An inflatable band is placed around the upper stomach to create a small pouch and narrow passage into the remainder of the stomach. This limits food consumption and creates an earlier feeling of fullness. Once the band is in place, it is inflated with saline. The band is adjusted over time by increasing or decreasing the amount of salt solution to change the size of the passage. The band is intended for severely obese people—those at least 100 pounds overweight or who are at least twice their ideal body weight—who have failed to lose weight by other methods such as a supervised diet and exercise. The band is intended to remain in place permanently, but it can be removed if necessary. People who get the band will need to diet and exercise in order to maintain their weight loss. Complications may include nausea and vomiting, heartburn, abdominal pain, band slippage, or pouch enlargement.

Roux-en-Y gastric bypass (RGB). The surgeon makes the stomach smaller by using surgical staples to create a small stomach pouch. The pouch is attached to the middle part of a small intestine. Food bypasses the upper part of the small intestine and stomach and goes into the middle part of the small intestine through a small opening. Bypassing the stomach limits the amount of food a person can eat. By bypassing part of the intestine, the amount of calories and nutrients the body absorbs is reduced. The small opening slows down the rate food leaves the pouch. One risk for patients is "dumping syndrome." This happens when the stomach contents move too rapidly through the small intestine. Symptoms may include nausea, weakness, sweating, faintness, and diarrhea after eating. Side effects include infection, leaking, pulmonary embolism (sudden blockage in a lung artery), gallstones, and nutritional deficiency.

Biliopancreatic diversion (BPD). This procedure is not commonly used in the United States. A large part of the stomach is removed. The amount of food is restricted, in addition to stomach acid production. The small pouch that remains is connected directly to the final segment of the small intestine, completely bypassing other parts of the small intestine. A common channel remains in which bile and pancreatic digestive juices mix prior to entering the colon. Weight loss occurs since most of the calories and nutrients are routed into the colon where they are not absorbed. This procedure is less frequently used than other types of surgery because of the high risk for nutritional deficiencies. A variation of BPD includes a "duodenal switch," which leaves a larger portion of the stomach intact, including the pyloric valve that regulates the release of stomach contents into the small intestine. It also keeps a small part of the duodenum.

Is liposuction a treatment for weight loss?

Liposuction is a procedure for shaping the body and is not recommended for weight loss. It is a surgical procedure in which fat is removed from under the skin with the use of a vacuum-suction canula (a hollow pen-like instrument) or using an ultrasonic probe that breaks up the fat into small pieces and then removes it with suction. Persons with localized fat may decide to have liposuction to remove fat from that area. It doesn't guarantee permanent weight loss. To avoid weight gain after liposuction, people need to eat right and be physically active. Complications from liposuction may include infection, embolism (fat gets trapped in the blood vessels, gathers in the lungs, or travels to the brain), puncturing of organs, seroma, pain or numbness, swelling, burns, skin problems, and reactions to the anesthesia.

I am concerned about my children's eating and exercise habits. How can I keep my children healthy?

The things kids learn as children become more difficult to change as they get older. This is certainly true for their eating and physical activity habits. Many children today have a poor diet with little physical activity. They eat foods high in calories and saturated fat and don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. They watch TV, play video games, or use the computer instead of being active. So kids are becoming overweight or obese and have a higher chance of becoming obese adults. Overweight children face health risks, like diabetes, gallstones, sleep apnea, and high blood pressure.

Help your child become more active.

- Set limits on the amount of time the family watches TV, plays video games, and uses the computer.
- Encourage your children to get one hour of physical activity every day.
- Find out about activity programs in your community.
- Ask your children what they like to do and what they'd like to try, like Little League Baseball or swim team.
- Create family activities that involve physical activity, like hiking, walking, or playing ball.
- Help your children eat right.
- Have your children plan and cook healthy meals with you.
- Don't do other things while you eat, like watch TV.
- Give your kids healthy snacks, like fruits, whole-grain crackers, and vegetables.
- Limit your trips to fast-food restaurants.
- Involve the whole family in healthy eating. Don't single out your children by their weight.

We know children do what they see—not always what they are told. Set a good example for your children. Your kids will learn to eat right and be active by watching you. Setting a good example can mean a lifetime of good habits for you and your kids.

For more information

You can find out more about obesity and weight loss by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-WOMAN or the following organizations:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), OPHS, HHS

Phone: (301) 594-1364

Internet Address: <http://www.ahrq.gov>

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

Phone: (202) 326-2222

Internet Address: <http://www.ftc.gov>

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), HHS

Phone: (888) 463-6332 (Consumer Information)

Internet Address: <http://www.fda.gov>

Food and Nutrition Information Center, USDA

Phone: (301) 504-5414

Internet Address: <http://www.nutrition.gov>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center (NHLBI) NIH, HHS

Phone: (301) 592-8573

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

Steps to a HealthierUS, HHS

Internet Address: <http://www.healthierus.gov>

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Phone: (202) 690-9000

Internet Address: <http://www.fitness.gov>

Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address: <http://win.niddk.nih.gov>

American Heart Association

Phone: (800) 793-2665

Internet Address: <http://www.americanheart.org>

American Obesity Association

Phone: (800) 98-OBESE

Internet Address: <http://www.obesity.org>

International Food Information Council

Phone: (202) 296-6540

Internet Address: <http://www.ific.org>

January 2005